

CONTEXTUALIZATION OR SYNCRETISM

On the margins of the spread of Christianity are found a great many independent, indigenous movements. These are influenced by Christianity and by native religions in varying degrees. They raise the critical question of what is legitimate contextualization of the Gospel, and what is syncretism.

For example, in Africa there are more than 6,500 independent church movements, most of them schismatic groups from protestant churches. In these movements, diagnosing and healing hidden diseases and sins is commonplace. The following cases are drawn from these. Evaluate them theologically:

1. Mutumwa Churches of Zambia

Prayer services start when all kneel facing east, heads down and hands raised. Praise is offered to Jehovah and to Christ as the only true healer, and prayers focus on the power of Satan at work. Hymns are based on Biblical themes, and passages of the Bible are read. Several preachers stress the fact that Jehovah has chose the "Mutumwas" (traditional tribal healers) to diagnose and heal diseases.

Patients are called one at a time and seated on a reed mat or sack, legs stretched out. They are approve the use of the power of the traditional African diviner and the spirit of Jehovah in him. If they agree they are to remain silent and answer only "yes" or "no" when questioned, and to mention noone's name during the session.

The traditional shaman, dressed in a white coat and carrying a traditional fly-whisk or stick in one hand and a Bible in the other begins by staring into his Bible or keeping his eyes closed. Then he moves the whisk or stick and says, "They are telling me . . .," "I am seeing . . .," "I am hearing . . .," "I can feel . . .," or "I am smelling . . ." The leaders claim that the holy spirit of Jehovah works through angels that show the leaders the past, the present and the causes for the illness of their patients.

2. The Christian Apostolic Faith Assembly in Zion of South Africa.

At dawn on Sunday, the Zionist prophet and his followers proceed to the stream they call Jordan. There the prophet asks those filled with the spirit, "What do you see?" They reply, "We have been shown by the Angel that so and so is a sinner. His robes are not clean. His heart is bad. We see that he committed adultery yesterday, or he was drunk, his robes are soiled with red, the red color of sin."

The sinner is caught by those standing by, and he is forced into the water. Some beat him all over the body, others take a firm grip on his throat. Then he is dipped into the water seven or nine times and dragged onto the shore.

3. The Church of the Lord, Aladura (Nigeria and Ghana).

After the worship service, the Primate or senior Apostles invite the sick and the weak to go to the Mercy Grounds. This is a fenced area near the church covered by sand. The sick enter without shoes and walk on their knees. They are left up to an hour or more in the hot sun, praying silently with their hands raised or folded on their chests. The Primate or elder Apostle then comes with a bottle of water, lays hands on and prays for the sick, sprinkles water on all present, and gives them water to drink from the same bottle. After personal talks with each, they are dismissed.

4. The Holy Ghost Hermetic Church of Africa (Kenya)

The sick come to the home of the "Holy Father, Baba Mtakatifu" who prays with them after the Sunday service. They may wait up to six or more hours.

The Baba Mtakatifu appears in a very colorful long robe holding a large decorated cross in his right hand. He takes the relatives aside and bargains with them over the price of his healing prayer, convincing them that if they do not pay generously the power of his prayer is limited. They usually pay \$300 to \$400 US. for one prayer. The poor give at least a cow or a goat.

After the financial matters are settled, the Holy Father lays the large cross on the heads of the sick and prays in different languages and tones, sometimes shouting loudly, sometimes muttering. The prayer may continue up to an hour. The sick are dismissed with the assurance that they are healed, and they are advised to come back if they need more prayers.

Sometimes the towels or other personal belongings of the Holy Father are carried by special messengers to the sick. They must not talk or salute anyone on the way, but go directly to the sick and lay the towel on them.

4. The African Zulu Zionists of South Africa

The Zulu Zionists in South Africa practice a ritual called *isiwasho* which means 'washing.' Water, salt and ashes are used as expellants, not only on the physical contents of the stomach, but also of evil spirits and sins. Ashes are cooling agent which, with water, neutralize hot and dangerous states. Ashes, the result of the cooling of fire, is taken from the fireplace of the prophet or minister where weekly meetings and singing is held. The ashes, *umlatha* (from the verb "to die out") must be wood ash and must be the result of fresh burning. Salt in itself seems to lack special meaning, but acts with water and ashes as an expellant. The three must be blessed which imbues them with power on a different level that is derived from the operation of the Holy Spirit within each Zionist Community.

The sinner, or man posses of evil powers, asks the prophet for purification (*ishiwasho*). He pays a small amount, attends the church service and stays behind with others who want to go through the same ritual. Ashes and salt are brought and put on the water. The prophet prays over

THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE

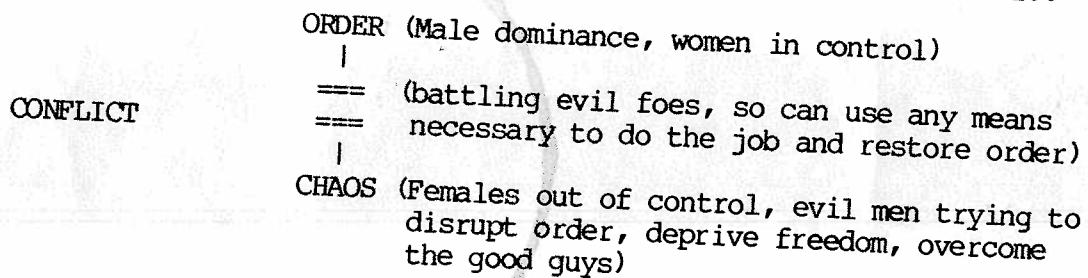
1. On December 9, 1531, 12 years after the conquest of Mexico City by Hernan Cortes, the Virgin Mary appeared to a humble Indian by the name of Juan Diego. On the way to mass, near the hill of Tepeyac he heard a sweet song and saw a white cloud encircled by a rainbow. It was a beautiful lady who spoke to him in Nahuatl and said she was the Virgin Mary, mother of the true God, and wanted a church built for her on that hill. Juan told the Bishop Juan de Zumarraga who did not believe him. On his way home, the Virgin again appeared to Juan. Again he told the Bishop and was rejected again. A third time the Virgin appeared, this time instructing him to gather roses from a garden where normally there was nothing but rocks and earth. He put these in his cloak and gave them to the Bishop. When the roses fell on the ground, they discovered the image of Mary on the blanket. It hangs today above the altar at the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe.
2. News of this and other miraculous appearances caused many to convert to Catholicism. Most miracles occurred among the Indian population. In 1544 a terrible epidemic killed thousands until the image was brought to town when the pestilence abated. In 1629 she prevented a flood. In 1810 the Virgin became the symbol of Mexico in its wars of independence. Father Hidalgo that year fought under the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe against the Spanish oppressors who fought under the flag of the Virgin of Remedios. Zapata and his troops had her image on their lapels. Pope Benedict XIV granted her a mass to be held on December 12. Pope Pius X declared her "Queen of Mexico and Empress of the Americas." Pope John Paul II praised her in his visit to the shrine in 1979.
3. Today the Virgin of Guadalupe is the "single most powerful element in Mexican Catholicism (Quirk)". Pilgrims drink at the sacred well, eat maize cakes in the plaza, light votive candles, give thanks for special healings, and observe mass. She appears without the Son for her powers are immediate, not derivative. She is the symbol of family, nurture, wellbeing and love.

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MYTHS RELATED TO MALE/FEMALE ROOT METAPHORS

1. MALE DOMINANT MYTH:

- 1.1 Root metaphor: Male - warrior, mighty, war, conquerer, keeper of order, abstract rationality.
- 1.2 Basic evil: Chaos which is associated with female. So long as women are married and kept in order by parents, husbands and sons, society is saved. But when they are freed the threat is chaos and disorder. So male dominance is needed to preserve society and maintain order.
- 1.3 Method: Men can use any means, good and evil to overcome evil foes and restore order. Thus detectives can break the law, Ollie North can use secretive means. The end justifies the means. Sin and righteousness cannot be sharply differentiated and are situationally determined.
- 1.4 God: transcendent, male, waring.
- 1.5 Female metaphors: wife, virgin, demon.
- 1.6 Male metaphors: father, husband, god.
- 1.7 Ethics: might makes right, any means necessary to achieve a good goal.
- 1.8 Time: linear, progression or regression.
- 1.9 World view: evolutionary, capitalist, survival of fittest, stress personal freedom, little concern with equality, hegelian dialectic.



2. FEMALE DOMINANCE

- 2.1 Root metaphor: Female dominance, fertility, life, nurture, reproduction, rebirth, ecstasy, feelings dominant.
- 2.2 Basic evil: sickness, death, violence, males out of control.
- 2.3 Methods: fertility rites, intercourse.
- 2.4 God: immanent, earth, female. World is real and alive.

Figure II-5.18
JONATHAN EDWARDS ON DISCERNMENT

Jonathan Edwards was involved in a great revival in which there were many experiences both positive and negative. In the process he developed a number of criteria for discerning the work of God. These are published in:

Edwards, Jonathan
 1959 **Religious Affections**. John E. Smith, ed. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

I. SIGNS WHICH ARE NOT NECESSARILY EVIDENCES OF THE WORK OF GOD.

1. Great religious experiences in themselves are no sign of their validity or that necessarily they are from God.
2. Religious experiences that have great effect upon the body are not necessarily valid.
3. Fluent, fervent and abundant spiritual speaking in no way demonstrates that the religious experience is necessarily divine.
4. If people do not create their own religious experiences, or by their own strength do not initiate the experiences, these experiences are still not necessarily valid or divine.
5. If a religious experience comes with texts of Scripture remarkably brought to mind, it is still not necessarily valid or divine.
6. The appearance of love in a religious experience is no proof that it is a valid or saving experience.
7. Multiplied religious experiences, accompanying one another is no evidence that the experience is necessarily saving or divine.
8. Religious experiences in which comforts and joys seem to follow conviction in a certain order are not necessarily saving or divine.
9. Spiritual experiences that stimulate the spending of much time in religious activity and zealous participations in the externals of worship are not necessarily saving experiences.
10. Religious experiences that cause men and women to praise and glorify God with their mouths are not necessarily saving and divine.
11. Religious experiences that produce confidence of being in a good estate in the people that have them are not necessarily saving or divine.
12. Religious experiences that are outwardly pleasing and very acceptable to the truly godly are not necessarily saving or divine (1959:127-181).

II. SIGNS THAT ARE EVIDENCE OF THE WORK OF GOD IN A PERSON'S LIFE

1. True believers exhibit divine affections whereas false believers show natural and carnal affections.
2. True believers love divine things (the objective ground for gracious affections).
3. True believers have an appreciation for the loveliness of moral excellence of divine things, a deep sense of personal sin, and a longing for holiness.
4. True believers do not downplay godly rationality - the sense of the heart.
5. True believers have a spiritual conviction of the reality and certainty of divine things.
6. True believers have a humility that is spiritual and thoroughly godly.
7. In true believers, spiritual discoveries alter the very nature of their soul. Their lives are transformed into Christ's likeness.
8. True believers have a spirit of gentleness leading to a spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness and mercy.
9. True believers have gracious affections that soften the heart and are attended and followed with a Christian tenderness of spirit.
10. There is symmetry, proportion and balance in true believers.
11. True believers strive for spiritual attainment whereas false ones often rest assured in themselves and their achievements.
12. The conduct of true believers demonstrates by outward evidence the inward changes that have taken place.

THE CONCEPT OF 'VITAL FORCE' IN BANTU RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

1. The supreme value of the Bantu, according to Temples, is the great vital force. This is the force that lies behind the universe, and, in particular, behind life.

"We can conceive the transcendental notion of 'being' by separating it from its attribute, 'force', but the Bantu cannot. 'Force' in his thought is a necessary element in 'being', and the concept 'force' is inseparable from the definition of 'being'... Without the element 'force', 'being cannot be conceived.... When we say that 'beings' are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantu say that 'forces' differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable and even material or mineral forces (Temples 1959:34-35)."

2. These forces form a hierarchy with the force of God at the top - the creator, sustainer and annihilator of all forces.

After God comes the archipatriarchs or 'founding parents' of different human clans. To seek their help is consistent for God placed the force in them and it is at the disposal of humans to strengthen their vital energy. Below the archipatriarchs are the ancestors or living dead. Those dead who no longer maintain an active relationship with the living is 'completely dead' and has zero energy, the worst of all disasters. The living are next in the hierarchy of power.

Next come all other forces: animal, vegetable, mineral and earth.

The Bantu sees himself as engaged in a constant struggle with the forces of nature that surround him. All created entities are linked into interrelated force-fields with the stronger dominating the weaker.

The power of the chief are found in a stool, a leopard skin, the teeth of a crocodile or other such symbol.

One sign of vital force is having many wives and children. Therefore, to be a barren woman is a deplorable existence.

In tribal warfare, the tribe with greater vital force is the victor.

Vital force is key to understanding Bantu divination, medicine, fetish, taboo and explanations.

The central themes of traditional religion then is **health, fertility and prosperity of the living individual and the living community.**

3. The Bantu universe is not a chaotic tangle of unordered forces blindly struggling with one another. They operate by determined laws:

- 3.1 A human can reinforce or demine another person's force. In a curse one can cause another to get sick or meet with an accident. Most or all misfortunes must be explained. They cannot be left to 'accident'.

- 3.2 Human vital force directly influences inferior force-beings such as animals, vegetables and minerals. Through them a person can affect other humans. Thus, at death, a person may become an animal.

- 3.3 Force can be compacted into a nodal point or vital center of being. Thus a lion's force is focused in its teeth. By getting a lion's tooth the hunter can add its force to his own. In the hunt, the struggle is between the forces of the hunter and the prey.

4. To know what particular vital forces has attacked a person, one must consulta a specialist in forces - the diviner. He sees more clearly the forces and their interaction.
5. A person also has a will which may be either good or bad, and uses forces accordingly.
6. Westerners were thought to have greater vital force. That explained their superiority in battles and technology. Despite exposure to modern education, notions of vital force persist under the surface.

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